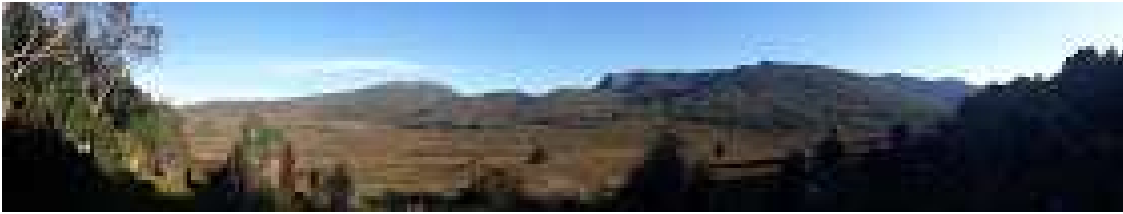


Friday, 8 February 2019

Darling it Hurts



Panorama from our start line. Marions lookout is dead centre of the picture. Cradle Valley.

Cradle Mountain Run 2019

Where do I start with this run? So many stories within stories.

In the mid-2000's I was running with a club in Launceston. One of the runners, a talented runner, but mid-pack would be descriptive of him (like me) would always regale us with tales of him competing in this thing called 'The Cradle Mountain Run'.

Me: "So you have a run around Cradle Mountain, from Dove Lake perhaps?"

John: "No, the whole length of the Overland Track"

Me: "You f%\$&(*@ what?"

Then I'd walk away shaking my head.

At that time, as a 5k to 21k runner (road); that distance, on a trail, was inconceivable. But it must have set my mind wondering. Roll forward a decade and in the midst of an ongoing litany of injuries I heard of another friend running at Cradle, and the seed firmly planted in my head.

Never told anyone at the time, not even my wife (Nicky). I needed to just get through rehab, get running again and see how I was in a years time. After the final injury in late 2016, I quietly decided to target Cradle as my long term goal. A couple of reasons. Having lived in Tassie I had walked sections of the track with Nicky, knew the beauty of the area, the stunning vistas, and probably not realising at the time, the difficulty of the track. Also, having transitioned to trail running in the last 6 years, it seemed to be the perfect event to aim for.

Capped to 60 runners (Parks and Wildlife set the cap), and proudly retaining its status as a run (not a race; no sponsorship, no razzmatazz, no gaudy bling, not even an event t-shirt), this is a much sought after entry. It sells out in around 4 to 5 minutes after entries open, the adrenaline rush of the entry night overshadowing any adrenaline felt on the day! I am reliably informed that I was in the top 10 to enter, a speed never to replicated in any event, ever... It is self-supported, no aid stations, you carry all your food, water (fill up where possible), and mandatory gear in case of an emergency. Cradle is quite possibly the oldest Ultra in Australia, kicking off in 1981 after a couple of local Tasmanian runners decided to find out what it would be like to traverse the Overland Track in one day. 39 events later it holds a special place in many an ultra-runners heart as a wish list item. It is special because of its beauty, the community feel of the event, the friendliness of the runners and vollies, and its remoteness. And it's hard to get into...

The Lead Up

Training was going well through November and December. As noted previously in [Two Bays account](#), a cold flattened me at New Years. The subsequent recovery, then the vain attempt to finish the race, meant that I had a sudden loss of confidence and a question mark over my fitness and possibly health. 3 weeks between Two Bays and Cradle meant that making up for lost time was out, and ticking over to make sure I was rested was the only option. In the fortnight leading up to the run I was also conscious of the fact that apart from the 28k at Two Bays, my last long run was 100k at Surf Coast in September. Was I going to have enough endurance in the legs come Saturday?

Monday of run week was a public holiday. I took my local running group on the 14k course I'm helping to organise for a local run in Rokeby. It also served as a rest with the new vest and full mandatory gear packed to simulate my run. It felt a bit heavy and unwieldy, but only one soft flask bottle in the front meant it wasn't at it's heaviest, but it was also a bit unbalanced. I hoped it would feel better on the day.

The start of this week also marked a rise in anxiety about this run. Unusual for me for a trail run. Normally fairly calm and only get the jitters on the morning, probably just wanting to start and get it done. But this was pushing myself out of my comfort zone, running into an area genuinely remote. (Between Pelion Hut and Narcissus there is no other way out except by helicopter). I voiced my fears to a few close friends and Nicky. All assured me I'd be fine. Wish I had their confidence!

The Weekend Commences

Thursday: Fly from Melbourne to Launceston and stay with a friend, Peter Johnson. Flight delays meant I arrived an hour later, justifying my reasons for not flying in on Friday morning. Having lived in Lonnie, I knew the issues that flights had coming in and out of the state. Settled into bed after Peter and I had caught up and discussed the run at length. I had a lot of information swirling around in my head, but thankfully a clear plan. One I intended to stick to, no matter what.

Friday: A bus was organised to take us to Cradle Mountain and our accommodation. Leaving at 12, but mandatory gear check started at 11. I was almost the first one there. #eager Only thing missing was lighter (or matches). Ducked over to Coles and grabbed some bananas, lighter and various other food items for breakfast on Saturday. One by one other runners and run organisers turned up until there was quite a crew on the grass at Brickfields. Meet fellow VUR's there; Gabor, Kez, Siqi, Kath and Andy. Kath and Andy are long term veterans of this run, combined finishes either 11 or 12 (Andy not too sure on his number of finishes). 12 o'clock we boarded the bus and set off for Cradle, one stop in Sheffield for a leg stretch and grab a bite to eat. I sat by myself and watched the countryside go by, reminiscing about living here 5 years ago. I miss Tassie, but circumstances mean Victoria is our home. And I don't regret that, having met some wonderful people there. Best of both worlds Possibly...



The start. Boardwalk, which is narrow and single file only.

Sheffield, and the cafe has no sandwiches left. So pastie and a large coffee it was! Usually a bit more particular with my food before an event, I just wanted calories and heaps of them. I got it, that slightly overfull feeling when back on the bus, on that windy road, all the way to Cradle.

Arrived safely (guts intact...) and we transfer our bags from the large bus to 2 smaller 22-seater buses with trailers that would be our transport within the park here. We were allocated rooms at Waldheim and I was to be sharing with Andy Hewat and another runner Lachlan, whom neither of us had met. The first thing we all do is unpack our bags and start sorting gear out for the run.

Mandatory gear list was the following;

2 thermal tops,

1 thermal long johns,

1 rain jacket,

1 overpants,

1 beanie,

Gloves,

Lighter or matches,

Map of the Overland Track (1:100,000)

Compass with dial size minimum of 40mm,

Emergency bivvy bag, and

Emergency food to 1800 kilo-joules. In my case a 200g block of dark chocolate. Others used 120g of Macadamias.

In addition were food and drink for the run, phone if you wanted to take photos and any other items you deemed 'necessary'.

All clothes in dry bags, or snap lock bags to keep them dry. Useless if wet and you are putting them on when you're cold. Food in bags and stowed in the main pocket, gels in the side pockets, clothes in bottom pouch, and soft flasks of Vfuel and water in front with phone and bag of food (chopped up Clif Bar). It all looked a bit huge. Andy, Lachlan and I comparing packs, amount of gear, fuelling strategies etc. I reckon for 60 runners, 60 different approaches.



Late afternoon sun on the pandani. Cradle Valley.

At 5 the buses turn up to take us back to the resort at Cradle for run brief and if anyone wants to eat at the bistro. Run brief was informative, but nothing out of the ordinary. It's all common sense, but nice to have it fresh in our minds. Always part of this run is an address by a PWS ranger about looking after the park, no littering etc. And of course discussion about fires, and snakes. Always snakes, just to put the wind up some people! Around 6:30 we returned to the huts to prepare for a night of interrupted sleep, as is the norm before an event. A few of us strolled down to the start line to survey the boardwalk, Marions (our first and steepest climb) looming out of the late afternoon light. The chat was lighthearted, a bit of banter, we were all probably a bit hyper with excitement.

Saturday: Alarm goes off at 4 after my estimated 4 hours of disturbed sleep. I'd left the phone on charge on the other side of the room, so it was a comical dismount from the bed trying to stay reasonably quiet, whilst banging my knee on the bunk stairs and muttering "fuck" under my breath. Eventually turned off the alarm, fired up the head torch and set about getting breakfast. Pitch black outside, and cool. Thermal on at the start seemed to be my thinking. Lachlan got up at 4:30, Andy at 5. By then there is also a bit of movement from the other huts. Doors banging, last minute trips to the toilet etc.

As with Two Bays, the queues were for the male toilets, being only a handful of women in the run. After breakfast I climbed back into bed for 20 minutes, trying to calm down an already pumping HR. Anxiety, nothing else. Pack the bags then struggle with both of them down to the put them on the bus, hoping that we will both be reunited (bags and me) at Lake St. Clair. I walk back to the start line, trying to recognise faces in the dull light. I'm aware of the feel of the pack on my shoulders and back. It is not overly heavy, water has helped it balance better than last Monday's trial. But there were a few lumps and bumps. Take it off, stuff hand in and move things around a bit, and that did the trick.



VUR at the start. L to R: Gabor, Kez, myself, Andy, Kath, Siqi and Sophie.

5:50am, 10 minutes to go, roll call and run brief. Runners are called out and ticked off. All 60 are present and ready to go, a cheer goes up. I grab fellow my VUR's and we get a group photo, light still dark enough that we needed to use the flash. A minute is announced as we all start to line up in single file to hit the boardwalk at the start. Self-seeding here, in other words, if you're slow, don't go to the front. The start is on a narrow boardwalk, no passing until we get well on our way to Crater Lake. My plan for today was to start very conservatively. I needed to get into Pelion (33k) feeling like I had plenty left in the tank. If that meant being at the back for a fair portion of the start, so be it. Not looking back, I thought I was in about 50th place, Gabor standing right in front, giving a few words of encouragement/pep talk as the last 10 seconds were counted down.

[Video of the start \(Too big to embed in the blog\).](#)

Cradle to Windermere Hut.

We are off. First section downhill, trotting at the start and trying to ease into a pace. A volunteer is counting each runner to make sure all 60 start. Not sure he counted me as 54 or 55. But I thought, "Shit, if I don't haul arse I'll be chatting with the sweepers!" drop down, cross Ronney Creek and head further up the boardwalk towards Crater Lake. Lots of chat, the pace is slow because it is still very low light and none of us wants to go arse up this early. Plenty of time for stacks when we are fatigued to buggery. A wombat, startled by the thundering of shoes on the boardwalk scurries under it, back to safety. They can move quickly when they want to. Boardwalk ends, trail starts and the first section of rocks is encountered. It would get much worse later on. But there were some of us that thought this was easy, this wasn't going to be as hard as we imagined. Some of us would learn that lesson the hard way in about 6 hours time...



On the way up to Marions Lookout. Stones on the ground pretty much the trail all the way up here. Light is just getting a bit brighter when we enter the first section of the forest. Immediately dark as, again. Eyes adjust slowly, the pace slows a bit. Crater Falls is trickling with not much flow, then we climb a few steps exit the forest into button grass and the light is far brighter. A quick look towards the ridge we will run

on in about 30 minutes reveals low cloud moving quickly, suggesting a bit of wind at our backs. Running in groups here, about 6 or 7 of us walk/run up to the turnoff to Marions. Phil Beeston is with us, I've known Phil on Instagram for a few years, but this weekend is the first time we've met. We are all chatting away before we hit the steep climb up Marions. For those who've never climbed up Marions, it has chains to hold onto. It's a heart starter and a half. Top out and then a bit more climbing before we hit the section towards Kitchen Hut.

If anybody wants to know why sections of the track weren't exactly easy to run, Exhibit A.

Video credit: Phill Beeston.

This trail undulates gently and gives us our first bit of constant running. I'm at the head of a group of runners and slowly drift away from them. Partly because they were setting their pace, partly because I was in a bit of a hurry to get to the hut. Toilet there, and for some reason, despite going at 5:00 am, I now needed to go fairly urgently. And I mean urgently. Shit. Figuratively, shit... Turned towards Kitchen Hut and only needed to run about 300 metres before I saw the hut and the toilet just beyond it. There were campers there (not supposed to be), and sure enough, there was someone already in the toilet. Dance up and down like someone attempting Riverdance and watch a stream of runners go past. As is run etiquette, if you ever leave the trail, for whatever distance, you drop your pack beside it. That way the sweepers know to stop and wait (they must always be behind the last runner). Finally, the camper exits and says "good on ya mate" (presumably because I'm running in the event, not because I'm about to dump. But really, I don't know...) I'm in and out in record time. 2 runners are standing at my pack, waving me on before them. The sweeps. Bugger, I'm dead last.



As we climb, we enter the low cloud sweeping across the valley.

No panic, we are only 5k in, still another 75k to rectify things. Although my brain at the time tried not to process it exactly like that. One of the sweeps had a familiar face. I'd seen him on the bus the day before and couldn't put a name or context to the face. But out here, with the bulk of Cradle Mountain on our left, hidden behind a uniform grey cloud, I suddenly worked it out. Vaughan was a friend of a friend who we went whitewater paddling with 18 odd years ago when Nicky and I first moved to Tasmania. Small world, 2 degrees of separation etc.

Moving along this section towards Waterfall Valley Hut the path was a bit rocky, occasional root and overgrown so you had to be careful of footing. The wind is howling in places. It's not cold when you're running. But stop for a few minutes and the chill would go right through you. The reason we carry so much mandatory gear was very evident along here.

Following a few slower runners, Vaughan and Brad (the other sweep) still behind me I was content to bide my time. The occasional glance at the watch to check HR revealed still in the high 130's, low 140's. Perfect. It needs to stay this way until at least the 45k mark. If not a bit longer. Eventually, we start descending towards the hut at the waterfall and I feel I need to move past some runners. I've been nipping at the heels of one poor runner for about 15 minutes and am aware that it can cause pressure to build up and make them rush, resulting in an accident. Running around Cradle Cirque the wind was really gusting. Boardwalk is old and is 2 parallel planks of wood with a 30mm+ gap in between. Running is a bit awkward with the feet splayed out slightly, and balance is not quite right. A gust of wind nearly blows me off the boards onto the vegetation. I only just stay in control. Temperature is plummeting along here and I'm glad I still have the thermal on.

Coming in towards Waterfall Valley Hut are a number of steps going down, twisting and turning left and right. Another runner comes up behind me, calls herself through and we both end up running past the path entrance to the hut. 2 girls are there, clapping and giving us encouragement as we pass. They will be the first of many walkers we encounter, all courteous, all getting off the path to let us through and give us good wishes as we go past. In return, I always thanked each and everyone, no matter how I was feeling. We are all comrades on a journey, some slower and carrying heavier packs, some faster and carrying the bare minimum.

Away from Waterfall Valley Hut and the path climbs again. More boardwalk and I must say I was pleasantly surprised at this. Expecting far more sections of rough trail along here. I look back and see the campsite at Waterfall, probably 8 tents pitched there that I could see. By now the clouds are breaking up and the odd patch of blue can be seen. Temperature is still cool, but I'm just nice with the thermal on. Somewhere between Waterfall and Windermere, I stop to take off the gloves and stash them in the back pouch of the vest. I notice I haven't drunk much water, and have only had 2 small pieces of Clif Bar. Now about 13k in and 2 hours, I decide I need to force a bit more food down. Hit a big debt in the next 2 hours and the last 30k will be horrendous.

A few of us have regrouped along here. It undulates, only the occasional steepish (relative to the rest, mind you) climb, but we are all hiking the climbs, running the downs and the flats. All is going well until a girl at the head of our group trips up on a rock and crashes to the ground. She is fine, shaken and probably more embarrassed than anything. She tells us to go on, so then there are 3 of us. The other 2 obviously know each other and are chatting away. I'm content to listen in and then throw my two bobs worth in at irregular intervals. Into another patch of forest, short and sweet, then exit onto more boardwalk and button grass plains. The first of a bunch of tarns is on our left, and before we know it we are descending towards Lake Windermere. It is a gentle descent, but we manage to trip and stumble a few times. Remind ourselves to pay more attention...

Windermere To Pelion Hut

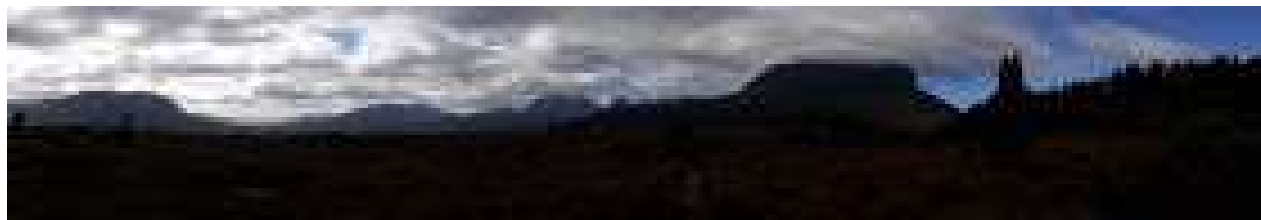
Windemere Hut is the first one that, if not actually on the trail, is close enough to duck in quickly to grab water from the tanks. This was going to be an issue throughout the day, knowing when to stop and grab water, when to push on and hope there was reliable water further ahead. I was fine, so kept going. Noticed a pack on the sign to the toilets and thought to myself, "Sweeps will get you!". Cloud now really starting to break up and the sun was poking through. The temperature rising and I'm still in my thermal. I stop to grab a gel from zip pocket on the left. Mini-disaster, zip breaks as I zip it back up. Shit, not what I need. I'm

standing there with 3 gels in my hand as friend Lance rocks up behind me (his pack at Windermere). He stashes them for me in the pouch on my left and thankfully I was able to grab them throughout the day.

Hit the first really rocky section of track at about the 22k mark. Normally these either;

- a. Shit me to tears,
- b. Freak the living daylights out of me, or
- c. All of the above.

But today I fell light-footed, confident and dance down as if I'm playing an extended game of hopscotch. Pass a runner who gleefully steps back telling me he is feeling like option b! I am feeling good, and the closer I get to Pelion Hut, the more I bury the doubts I had after Two Bays. This section continues a gradual descent towards the Forth River. It is really nothing more than a creek here, at its headwaters. But it is still flowing enough that I decided to stop and grab some water. By now I'm drinking a bit more and have emptied my single water flask at the 25k mark. In hindsight, I should have peeled my thermal off and stowed it away. I was warm and knew I had a bit of a climb out before we ran towards Pelion Hut, but thought I would stop properly and do it at the checkpoint there. Through here the occasional smell of Sarsaparilla, the scent coming from groves of Sassafras trees. It's a most unusual smell to suddenly be hit with in the Australian bush.



Panorama of Pelion Plains. On the left, Mount Oakleigh. Under cloud on the right, Mount Pelion West, and in the middle background is Mt Ossa.

The runner I passed on the rocky downhill runs over the bridge as I'm upstream collecting water. After I sort myself out and continue on it takes me a while before I glimpse him again through the trees. Away to my left is the bulk of Mount Oakleigh, and I know that Pelion is close, don't need the distance on my watch to tell me. The final 2 k's into Pelion roll along next to grassy plains and just before we got there I came right up behind the runner (who I now know was called Weston, we would cross paths several times today.) Hit the checkpoint, 33k in 4:58. probably my slowest ever time over that distance, but not because of lack of effort. I wasn't a bit fatigued, but I knew I'd been working reasonably hard. Finally, stop and have my timing chip scanned and I stop to get the thermal off. By now it is really warming me up and is absolutely rank. The ranger is there chatting with the vollies, looks at my legs and goes, "Geez, you've got some pins!". My first thought, "You've been stationed here a bit too long, sunshine!". Unfortunately saying the word "legs" suddenly throws ZZ Tops - 'She's Got Legs' into the turntable of my mind. Oh great. I'd already seen off Billy Joels - 'It's Still Rock and Roll To Me' and The Meanies - '10% Weird' in the lead up to here, now as I climb towards Pelion Gap 'She Got Legs' swirls round and round and round my head.... But, not before I'd run 50 metres up the path and realised I'd left my sunnies on the camping platform. Run back, grab them then head up towards the gap.

Pelion to Windy Ridge Hut

I was back on familiar territory here having camped at Pelion and walked up Ossa with Nicky and Jordan the year before we moved to Victoria. But in my mind it was a short couple of k's, then the steep climb, then the gap. What my mind refused to accept was that it went on for a lot longer than that. A long slow grinding climb that for the first time today did my head in. Crossed Pelion Creek, another runner grabbing water (you could from the Hut at Pelion, but it was a bit out of the way, many of us electing to push on to the creek.) I kept going, then finally hit the steep section. I was hiking up here, purposely I thought, chatting to a group of walkers, and noticed they were keeping pace with me. They were carrying packs, 15 to 20 kilos. That was not a good sign. When I hit the gap I stopped, took a few photos, grabbed another gel and then composed myself for the next section. Whatever I did it worked, the descent towards Kia Ora and onwards to Du Cane Hut was the best section for me for the whole day.



Du Cane Range as seen from the trail at 37k mark.

It was boardwalk and well-formed trail for good sections along here and I made good time, but better still felt really good. Stopped at a creek a few k's after the gap as the water looked cool and inviting. Sun was well out now and warm when we were in the open. And here was where troubles later on, would start. Filled up my flask and then only a km later realised I was soaking wet down that side of the body. The nipple was leaking and I couldn't work out how to stop it. Knowing that water was a premium along this section, I didn't want to empty it, so I put up with it. Stopped again before Kia Ora to take a photo and realised the phone was a bit wet. Shit. Cleaned out the bag it was in, resealed the bag and continued on. The flask kept leaking. Normally I'd worry about chaffing, but now I was worried about the phone.

Stopped in at Kia Ora to refill a bottle and put more Vfuel in it. 2nd packet today, I had one left. A runner there I'd passed before here, and he was struggling a bit, but still pushing on. Later on, I'd find out he was a friend of a friend, Tassie again.... Pushing on after stopping here I was noticing the temperature was warming up, not hot, nowhere near it, but enough to let me know that water was going to be needed. Running was generally good along this section to Du Cane. A mixture of boardwalk and formed track, it felt either flat or slightly downhill. In and out of short forest sections, the occasional rustle in the bushes beside the track being either marsupial (not likely), bird (only possibly), or snake (most definitely). I got somewhat in the zone though, not really taking in the surroundings as much as concentrating on running to effort. Still keeping the HR in a respectable zone. Passed another runner casually squatting on a log on the side of the track, having a bite to eat as if it was picnic time. Enquired to his health and such, he was just fine. Needed to stop and eat.



Du Cane Hut. Just past the halfway point, and the warmest part of the day.

At 6 hours 34 minutes and 41 kms in I hit Du Cane Hut. I must have still been in the zone as I sailed straight past the sign pointing to Windy Ridge (in my wafer-thin defence it didn't say Overland Track, nor was it in good condition having been bleached in the sun for many a year) and continued on straight. Only about 50 odd metres down the track and it petered out. Turned around and met my picnicking friend standing at the sign asking which way. "Can you read the sign", I ask. "Yep, To Windy Ridge", he says. A wry smile on my face I head down the correct track and hit the most beautiful forest. Tolkenesque was my best description. An abundance of moss on trees, dappled light struggling through the canopy, and the gnarliest tree roots covering the forest floor, and ultimately, the trail... It was tough going. The momentum gained from Kia Ora to Du Cane evaporated in a flash. I'd been quality of looking at the watch thinking if I hit a few time marks I'd be in with a shot of a sub 13 time. Stop thinking crap was now my thoughts.

After about 10 minutes I spied another runner ahead through the forest. Running much like me; hit a good

section and shuffle along, then walk the worst bits (a little too steep up or just too many ankle tripping tree roots). It took me about 1 and a half k's to catch up with her. But as I caught her I decided not to overtake. Mainly to slow myself back a little bit (was getting a little out of control on this section chasing mythical split times), and partially as I thought the company would be good. I'd been running on my own practically since the 22k mark (now around 45k mark), and whilst I am content with my own company (Christ knows I need to be!) I felt like a friendly physical presence would be fine for a while. Her name was Carolyn and she was a runner from Launceston. I'd never met her, but the name was familiar from a few running forums I'm linked to. We chatted a little bit as we started the long slow gradual climb towards Windy Ridge (our last true climb for the day). But then run and walk for a distance before striking up a conversation again. In some way, it helped take the mind away from the task ahead, and made the time go quicker (just not our pace, unfortunately). More rough trail, although getting better the longer we ran on, and then a bunch of bushwalkers eating what we supposed was lunch off the side of a track to Hartnett Falls. They didn't even appear to register that we ran right past them.



Some old signs still exist on the track.

We knew the climb to Windy Ridge was on when the ascent suddenly increased and then the occasional section of boardwalk appeared. The forest opened out, drier more Eucalyptus than Fagus or Myrtle and the temp was now at it's warmest of the day. As we climbed, a creek trickled tantalisingly close but camouflaged behind the dense undergrowth. I hoped we'd cross it soon, needed to refill the bottles and to wet my THIR around my neck to cool off. Turned a corner to see a runner walking, very slowly. In fact, he looked pretty crook. Stopped to talk to him, ask him how he was. Cooked, was the short reply. His name was Dan and he seemed determined to finish. "Get to Narcissus" was my advice, then he could decide what next. There was nowhere along here to get out, the only way is forward.

Carolyn and I continued on. I was behind her, but a few times she asked if I wanted to get past and run on. No, I was content to stay here and have the company. Very soon we had finished the climb and started the short descent to Windy Ridge. Nice to be going downhill, and on a gentle slope. But it is very rocky. The delicate 'dancing down' of about 25k ago long since lost with the growing fatigue in the legs. Still moving down at a steady pace, but slowing up rather than coming a cropper on the rocks. All was going well until we hit a section of track that suddenly turned hard right, went down steeply and turned hard left again. Carolyn was momentarily confused, the track appeared to go straight ahead. She stopped, then turned right, only to trip on a rock. It was one of those moments you play over and over in your head, could I have moved quicker to grab her? It was slow motion, it was over in the blink of an eye. Pitching forward on the steepest section she crashed down right on top of the rocks, right cheek taking the bulk of the impact. It was heart in the mouth stuff. She lay still for a second, a very long second I might add. Then moved to sit back up again. Thankfully not knocked out, but there was still the possibility of a concussion. I immediately raced down beside her to check her out. It clearly had shaken her, tears were nearly close, but within a minute or 2 she'd composed herself and was ready to run on. I lead this time, and without further incident, we made it to Windy Ridge in 8 hours 24 (51k's).

Windy Ridge to Narcissus Hut

Timing chip checked again, we fill water bottles at the tank, and head off towards Narcissus. Trail more open, still rough in places, rocks, tree roots etc. Several snakes scatter quickly out of our way, we slow down to give them room to move, and our HR time to recover! We run another couple of k's along here, the Traveller Range high on our left, The Acropolis and The Parthenon away to our right. This results in a very hot valley to run through. Not a hot day, considering recent weather, but it is still warm enough we are aware of our need to keep the water up. Carolyn stops at a creek to get more water, and I stand for a minute, then keep on running. And this will bug me for a long time to come, but I never told her I was going to do that. Just head off. There was no agreement to keep together, no understanding that we were looking out for each other, but I should have said something, anything. And probably karma, but 2 k down the road I stack, very heavily. Right foot trips on a rock as it trails through and I don't get the left foot down quickly enough. As with Carolyn, slow motion and lightning quick at the same time. One second I'm upright, next I'm horizontal staring at the dirt and grimacing at the pain in my ribs and knees. Elbows took a lot of the impact, saving the rib from a tree root, but the risk of popping a shoulder is off the charts.

*The picturesque run into Narcissus with Mt Olympus as a backdrop. The runner is VUR, Kex McT
Video credit: Phil Beeston.*



The suspension bridge at Narcissus River. Get here and you know
the checkpoint is a few k's away

And definitely my own fault. I'd started doing mental calculations re getting into Narcissus (pretty much guaranteed to be completely wrong, mid-ultra) under 10 hours and that would give me a shout of sub 13. As I picked myself up, I uttered a few chosen oaths to the surrounding countryside, then told myself to calm the fuck down, just get into the next checkpoint in one piece. Ran on again, keeping a keen eye on any tripping hazards as the path flattened out and then the boardwalk started, a sure sign I was getting close to Narcissus. The last km before the suspension bridge over Narcissus River is flat and winds through button grass and sedge. It is warm, but the sun is now passed the highest point in the sky. Hit the bridge, stop for the obligatory bridge shot, and a selfie and then run in the last k to the checkpoint. (Not before seeing a woman

step out around a corner and grab a few photos as I ran past. And I was running here, thankfully). And then, almost out of nowhere, Narcissus Hut appears and the 62k checkpoint.

Narcissus to Cynthia Bay, and the finish.

It was Marsh fly heaven (or nightmare). Buggers were swarming (like flies?), and getting into the food and under the skin of the vollies. Served with coke and watermelon, never having tasted soooo good. Refilled my water bottles, ate more watermelon and drank more coke, then headed out to complete the last 18k. I was an hour inside cutoff, plenty of time to finish, but in the grey area of whether sub 13 was achievable. At this point, stepping away from the checkpoint, I felt confident I could do it. Later on, I would understand why 3 hours for 18k along here is quite good going. A small section of boardwalk before the path turns south to head down the western side of Lake St. Clair, then back into the dark and cooler forest. And though this track (and all of the Overland Track for that matter) was very dry this year, this section of trail was going to be difficult. There is a reason most walkers just catch the ferry from Narcissus rather than walk the final 18k!

Only a few minutes into the forest and I spy a couple of runners ahead. Andy Hewat, my roommate at Waldheim, and another runner Paul from Sydney. Andy waved me passed as soon as I caught him, he'd decided he'd raced enough and was saving his legs for a race in WA in a few weeks time. A lazy 360k run on the Bibblimum Track in the south-west! Ran with Paul for a while, chatting about our respective race day experiences so far, chatting about the pros and cons of living and working where we did etc. Was nice to while away the time in this twisting and turning sod of a path. Then Paul suddenly stopped and pointed to track left, a snake. A rather large jet black one! No stripes, so the assumption was a copperhead. But never seen any that big in Tassie. Immediately after that, we both blundered off course. Trail in the gloam was indistinct and we had mistaken a bunch of tree roots in one direction as the 'official' bunch of tree roots that was the trail. Started to backtrack only to bump into Andy who spotted a trail marker and off we went again.



As hard and crappy as this section can be, it had some lovely paths and forest. Lake St. Clair, 68k mark.

At the 66k mark, a sparrows fart under 11 hours, my watch beeped for low battery. I knew this was going to happen, so had packed a power pack to recharge it. I stopped, Paul telling me to catch up with him, and off he went. I didn't take too long to get the charger out, connect it and start moving again. But in the interim, Andy passed me, and another runner, Weston, who'd I'd first encountered at Pelion. Not having anyone to run with, and lacking any energy to 'run hard for a short bit', I lost the mental battle to push hard, and found myself walking a lot more than I should have. But, quite frankly, I was completely stuffed. I was also wondering where the hell Echo Point was. In my vague and failing memory, I thought it was about 3k from Narcissus. Wrong. Later on worked out it is about 5k. And still, this trail continued to give and give. Give me the shits, give me hell, give me the feeling I was going to be out in the dark. I really got into a bit of a hole along here.

Passed Andy again. He had his poles out and was walking along, then using the poles to massage his quads. Nobody, I repeat nobody was going anywhere near my quads, or hammys, or anything from the waist down. It all hurt. Was hoping it would just go numb and be done with it. Got to Echo Point, stood dumbfounded at a sign that just said 'Toilet' until a girl in a tent said, "Yep, that's the way. And good luck, you're looking good!". Nice sentiment, but she could lie for Australia. Just past Echo Point was a creek. I stopped to refill my bottle and drape the THIR in the water again. Glad I did, there was no more water to be found until a few k's out from the finish. Along here I started to do some mental calculations again; based on current distance and overall time, current pace, trail condition, something about the angle of the sun, something else about the hypotenuse of a triangle, more shit about the probability of teenagers doing Morris Dancing... Yeah, my brain was about 30 seconds to 2 years behind reality and I was struggling to work out basic math. Somehow, from the dark vortex of my brain, I reckoned I was good for 13:30. Fuck it, I thought, just keep moving.



Kez and I at the finish, proudly sporting our VUR shirts.

Photo credit: Kez McT

And move I did. It was essentially run anything that I was able to. Downhill was 50/50, depending on rocks and tree roots. Flat the same. Uphill was only achievable if I'd been running downhill and momentum took me part way back up (and zero rocks and tree roots!). Sections of forest were quite dark, no doubt the shadow of surrounding hills playing a part, but my mind would think it was actually getting late. Then I'd see the lake and know there was still plenty of daylight. Tripped a few times along here but managed to stay upright and not spasm the hammy into a massive cramp. Another look at the watch, another fruitless mid-ultra calculation. Give up son, just move forward.

Then I noticed the track surface was better, more light through the trees and changing flora. Turn off to Playtipus Bay appears, and I know I'm around 4 odd k to the finish. The track flattens out, but I'm really only good for about 100 metres of running, then a walk break, then another 100 metres of running. The first signs to Watersmeet appear and I pick up my pace, somewhat. Hit Watersmeet and know it's only 1.5k to the finish. But the trail just seemed to go on and on and on. Every corner a bit hopeful of a glimpse of the finish line, each corner just showing my trail. A bit of a hill, a cleared area, another corner, another brief flash of disappointment. And then sweet relief, veering left I spied a green hut, interpretation signs, a line of witches hats and then the 2 finish flags. About 2 dozen people, runners, vollies, friends of both are there as I run the final 50 metres to cross the line. My timing chip is scanned. It's over. I feel the usual mixture of emotions; relief, happiness, and a sense of achievement. Friend Kez is there having finished about 40 minutes before me. Great to see her, she grabs me a can of Solo from the esky, and I smash it down, doing justice to an advert from my youth. And I am utterly spent.

*And... finished. With that look that conveys a thousand emotions, most of them thank F...
Video credit: Phil Beeston.*

Aftermath



Went in with a slight tear in the upper fabric. End result: The Last Race...

It didn't take me long after the run to realise what I had done was of so much significance to me as a runner. I entered knowing it was going to push me out of my comfort zone, and it did. But I survived, I had fun for the most part, but more than that I proved that I could set my mind to a task and get it done.

Already talking about going back. Not sure I ever said this was a one and only, or it would be an ongoing event for years to come. But not just the race, but the entire weekend captivated me. And the plan is to go back, this time armed with the knowledge of how I need to train, and what I need to train on trail wise to better this result.

Postscript: Met Carolyn back at Derwent Bridge Hotel after she'd finished. She gave me a big hug as I tried to explain that I should have told her that I was continuing on. She immediately told me it was okay. And I'm glad that she felt that way. But still it bugs me, I'm not like that.

Next race, Duncans Run. 100k with 4000m of vertical elevation. 7 weeks after Cradle. Just enough time to recover, briefly train then taper again.

Until next time...

([https://pborwall.blogspot.com/2019/02/darling-it-](https://pborwall.blogspot.com/2019/02/darling-it-hurts.html?m=1&fbclid=IwAR2Tt7rMt434ijGtKhAvlq7tAOaF2oVbiV3GxwZH-rjbbQERwKJvrAHaK8E)

[hurts.html?m=1&fbclid=IwAR2Tt7rMt434ijGtKhAvlq7tAOaF2oVbiV3GxwZH-rjbbQERwKJvrAHaK8E](https://pborwall.blogspot.com/2019/02/darling-it-hurts.html?m=1&fbclid=IwAR2Tt7rMt434ijGtKhAvlq7tAOaF2oVbiV3GxwZH-rjbbQERwKJvrAHaK8E))